

Beyond Representation: Ambedkar on Caste and the Question of Social Transformation

Dr. Pankaj Srivastava 

Department of Philosophy, Panjab University, Chandigarh, India.

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This research paper aims to revisit B. R. Ambedkar's socio-political philosophy by exploring the interplay between caste and contemporary social transformation. It argues that Ambedkar's critique of democracy is incomplete if representation is seen as the end rather than a means to dismantle the caste system. This study addresses three major issues. First, it critically analyses how caste remains a structuring force in democratic life and impacts access to voices, recognition, and institutional power. Second, it demonstrates that representational limits can be traced in identity politics; symbolic inclusion is realised, but it does not result in the emancipation of the marginalised groups. Third, it establishes the concept of fraternity as one of the foundations when developing the foundation of freedom and equality in Indian democracy. In this context, fraternity stands out as the most conclusive idea of Indian democracy. This paper argues that Ambedkar does not just offer a theory of representation but also a critical approach towards social change wherein the term fraternity is critical to give democracy a social aspect that would make it morally sound.

Keywords: Caste, Social Transformation, Identity Politics, Freedom of Speech, Public Sphere, Fraternity, Indian Democracy.

Introduction

To engage philosophically with Indian democracy, one must address the inherent contradiction between political equality and ongoing social inequality, a paradox that B. R. Ambedkar with remarkable clarity articulated in his writing. Ambedkar's importance extends beyond his role as the chief architect of the Indian Constitution, embracing his lasting critique of the constraints of constitutionalism in caste society. Democracy, for him, could never be reduced to institutional or electoral processes; it was a moral or social form that demanded a change in the relationships between people. Ambedkar's conception of democracy rests on the inseparability of liberty, equality, and fraternity. He argued that political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it social democracy", warning further that without equality, liberty would produce the supremacy of the few over the many" (Ambedkar, 1949/1994). This

tension is captured in his famous formulation that India would enter a "life of contradictions," where political equality coexists with deep social and economic inequality. For Ambedkar, fraternity provides the ethical basis of democracy, as "a sense of common brotherhood... which gives unity and solidarity to social life" (Ambedkar, 1949/1994,). In his book *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar explicitly asserts that democracy is not just a form of government but mainly "a mode of associated living" (Ambedkar, 1936/2014, p. 263). This formula alters the emphasis of institutions on social relations. In this regard, democracy demands mutual recognition and equality, which the law cannot guarantee. It should be experienced as a form of socialisation based on dignity and reciprocity. Ambedkar said that caste is not just about dividing work but about dividing workers (Ambedkar, 1936/2014, p. 255).

This study is premised on the contradiction between political and social equality and examines the limitations of

representation in caste-driven societies. While contemporary democratic discussions often view representation as a crucial tool for inclusion, Ambedkar's insights may prompt a critical evaluation of whether representation truly serves as an effective means to dismantle deeply entrenched social hierarchies. This contradiction, highlighted in this study, is a major conflict inherent in the idea of representation in caste-based communities. Even though democratic systems often consider the entry point of political inclusion and social justice to be representation, as Ambedkar's critique demonstrates, representation might not be enough to undermine the deeply rooted hierarchies and systemic inequalities formed by the caste system. This raises questions about the belief that political inclusion is a guaranteed path to achieving meaningful social transformation, suggesting that representation should be paired with significant structural changes to address the root causes of caste oppression. Ambedkar's ideas critically examine the constraints of representational politics within the framework of entrenched societal stratification. They compel us to consider whether the mechanisms of democracy, as manifested in their contemporary forms, are sufficient to integrate or address the challenges faced by marginalised groups within the caste system. The growth of political participation in India in terms of elections, affirmative action, and identity-based mobilisation has changed the face of its democratic institutions. However, as recent scholarship indicates, these changes have not necessarily been represented in fundamental social change

(Jaffrelot, 2003; Deshpande, 2011). Caste influences resources, institutional power, and the voices of the masses. This means that representation cannot exist in a specific social structure.

The matter is even more complex when viewed in terms of freedom of speech. The concept of free speech, as interpreted in liberal democratic theory, is an individual right established by the law. Ambedkar challenges this abstraction by placing the speech in the context of the social conditions. Voice, or the ability to speak, does not exist uniformly in hierarchical societies. Caste is a determinant of who is allowed to discuss the general discourse and whose words are considered valid. Ambedkar's criticism emphasises that freedom of speech should be viewed in the context of social power relations, where marginalised groups tend to experience the convergence of caste and freedom of speech issues. The caste and freedom of speech come to a crossroads, which makes it evident that the social hierarchy predetermines not only the right to speak but also the perception of speech in open spaces, which defines the power of the voice. To grasp freedom of speech, it is important to analyse the social circumstances that define voice and power and not to take freedom of speech as an abstract legal principle, which is not tied to a particular context. This silencing cannot be addressed through legal means. Thus, freedom of speech cannot be defined outside the context of social formation, which informs the voice and recognition. This observation offers a valuable point of departure for reformulating identity politics. Ambedkar did not base his political

project on the conservation of identities as fixed categories but on the destruction of social structures in which such identities are used as tools of domination. Identity politics can enhance democratic engagement when marginalised communities mobilise their identities to demand rights, resist marginalisation, and gain access to institutional spaces. However, when it is limited to the logic of representation, in which groups vie to be recognised and, in the process, do not alter the underlying inequalities, it risks strengthening the hierarchies it is supposed to weaken. Recent politics in India indicate that identity politics have become more tactical and entrenched in political processes, especially in electoral mobilisation and policy debates.

However, it has limited transformative capability. If identity politics is limited to the future of representation, it will most of the time lead to groups competing over the issue of recognition without adequately tackling the underlying structural inequalities that perpetuate the social hierarchy. This narrow measure may unwittingly reproduce the power dynamics that it is meant to question, since inclusion is symbolic but not redistributive in terms of resources and opportunities. Under these circumstances, identity assertions assume a political visibility role rather than a change agent role, which may lead to the continuation of existing social stratifications in the name of diversity and inclusion. This is dynamic in recent Indian politics, where identity politics has become increasingly instrumentalised in electoral campaigns and policy debates. Political actors use identity

affiliations to organise voter groups and bargain power, accentuating group demands that can be accommodated within existing structures rather than confronting underlying caste, class, and religious inequalities. Although this strategic use of identity politics guarantees its continuation and relevance in political discourse, its capacity to effect essential social change is limited, thereby restricting the possibility of achieving broader social justice and equity.

Fraternity is not a decorative ideal for Ambedkar but rather an ethical state which renders democracy socially suitable. In his work, *Annihilation of Caste*, he presents democracy as “a form of associated living” founded on respect and reverence for others and therefore treats fraternity as another name for democracy (Ambedkar, 1936/2014, p. 88). (Ambedkar, 1936/2014, p. 88). In this formulation, democracy ceases to be an institutional arrangement and becomes a social ethic instead. Ambedkar states that no political democracy can endure without social democracy at its foundation, understood as a way of life comprising liberty, equality, and fraternity as an inseparable trinity (Ambedkar, 1949/1994). In this regard, fraternity provides an affective and moral framework through which liberty and equality gain substantive meaning in the context of social relations. Without it, democratic institutions become formal systems that lack social relevance and legitimacy. This threat is most clearly seen in caste societies, where stratification sets up the impossibility of a common social life. Caste is not just a division of labour, as Ambedkar claims, but a stratification whereby the

divisions of labourers are ranked one above the other (Ambedkar, 1936/2014). Thus, the destruction of caste is not just a social reform program but a precondition for the actualisation of democracy itself.

Ambedkar's thoughts remain relevant, given the current predicament of Indian democracy. The absence of democratic norms concerning dissent, regulation of speech, political mobilisation based on caste, and the fight over minority rights are all signs of democracy's failure. These developments provoke a basic question: Does the expansion of representation and rights correspond to social change, or does it merely reorganise the status quo of democracy?

This paper argues that the solution is to move beyond representation and return to the cause of the problem to achieve a radical shift in social relations. To address the contradiction of political equality and social inequality or debate on representation and social transformation, this study first describes the concept of caste as a durable power structure that determines access to voices, recognition, and institutional membership. Second, it questions the boundaries of representation and identity politics, as it is limited to symbolic inclusivity. Third, it reworks Ambedkar's idea of social democracy, with particular emphasis on fraternity as a prerequisite for meaningful freedom and equality.

Re-grounding Political Freedom in Social Democracy

Ambedkar's greatest contribution to democratic theory was his rejection of the

narrow liberal concept of freedom. In a speech delivered in the Constituent Assembly on 25 November 1949 he explained that India could not be satisfied with political democracy alone and should transform it into a social democracy. He described social democracy as a lifestyle that acknowledges liberty, equality, and fraternity as its values, and he described these values as a union of the Trinity. This expression is crucial because it links the political concept of democracy to the social conditions that oppress it. Liberty and equality are empty without fraternity, and equality without liberty is the tyranny of the few over many. The strength of this claim is that one cannot comprehend democracy by referring to institutions alone, such as elections, legislatures and courts. These institutions are important; however, they are insufficient in the case of graded inequality in defining social relationships. Ambedkar clearly explained Indian society as one in which social life is characterised by graded inequality and economic life by stark poverty and extreme wealth. He also cautioned that political equality in the sense of one man, one vote, would go hand in hand with social and economic inequality unless a transformation was made in society's fabric. That is, even when there is no democratic substance, the political rhetoric of democracy can endure.

This is why Ambedkar remains significant and relevant in the discourse on modern Indian identity politics. In a caste-organised society, identity is not an optional or surface-level category. This indicates an individual's position regarding power, recognition, and exclusion. For Ambedkar,

caste was not merely an innocent cultural distinction but a deeply entrenched hierarchy that influenced every facet of life, including the political realm. When democratic institutions overlook this social reality, formal/political equality becomes a façade for the ongoing domination. Therefore, his philosophy insists that identity politics should be assessed not by its ability to mobilise differences but by its effectiveness in dismantling hierarchy.

Ambedkar's anti-caste argument in Annihilation of Caste intensifies this by exposing caste as a comprehensive social system. He said that caste is not only a "division of labour but also a division of labourers", and that it is a gradation in which divisions are ranked above one another. This criticism applies to the current research because it demonstrates that the issue is not limited to women's representation in the government. The underlying issue is the social order that determines the value of labour, voices, and dignity. The modern scholarly interpretation of Ambedkar as a critical theorist of emancipatory democracy views him as a theorist of representation associated with living and economic restructuring.

Voice and Power: Ambedkar on the Conditions of Free Speech

Ambedkar's stance on freedom of speech remains poorly understood because it is often read in isolation from his broader conceptions of democracy and social justice. He justified the necessity of speech in a free society and never discussed speech as an uncontrolled licence. On 4 November 1948 he

denied the assertion that fundamental rights had to be absolute to be meaningful in the Constituent Assembly debate. He referred to the American legal principle to demonstrate that freedom of speech does not confer a right or a responsibility-free, unbridled right to speak or publish anything without accountability. He was not making an anti-libertarian point but a constitutional one. Rights must be safeguarded, but they must also be placed in the context of responsibility and the common good of society. This is significant because Ambedkar did not consider free speech to be independent from social power. He recognised that speech possesses the capacity to safeguard liberty but also has the potential to inflict harm. When societal inequality is high, certain individuals exert greater influence. Thus, a constitution should protect freedom of speech but not allow it to humiliate, threaten or coerce others. Ambedkar's argument is especially applicable today, when online platforms can enhance our power to speak and express ourselves but also propagate hate, fake news and humiliation.

Presenting the Draft of the Constitution, Ambedkar explained the inclusion of administrative measures with reference to constitutional morality. This notion is noteworthy because it refers to legality as a source of ethical guidance for nurses. Constitutional morality entails that institutions not only exist but also function as intended, guided by core democratic principles, such as justice, equality, and dignity. For example, freedom of speech is more than just having the right to speak; it means speaking within a constitutional

framework that prevents the guise of dominance from masquerading as free expression. This vision is implied in the Constitution's preamble. It guarantees liberty of thought and expression, equality of status and opportunity, fraternity, and individual dignity. These are constitutional pledges, not independent of Ambedkar's philosophy but the constitutional expression of his politics. Thus, the Preamble is not a mere ritualistic text. This is the most explicit statement that Indian democracy should incorporate freedom, equality and dignity.

On a different plane, Ambedkar's method is applicable, as he realised that democratic speech is a treatment for minority issues. On 4 November 1948 in a debate, he said that majority rule should not be used as an excuse to discriminate and that minorities should be considered and empowered to become part of a single democratic nation. This is a thinly veiled but significant concept. This means that democracy does not demand the effacement of difference but a political culture in which difference is not turned into enduring subjugation. This is precisely why the question of free speech and minority voices cannot be considered two distinct issues.

Representation as Democratic Entry

Debates over identity politics are common in India and are frequently viewed as either an alienating menace to national harmony or a path toward empowerment. Ambedkar addressed identity politics in three interrelated ways. First, he reads collective assertions by the oppressed as a necessary response to caste society because

untouchables were socially isolated and their distinct interests could not be voiced by others; representation had to begin with their own political articulation. Second, he insists on substantive representation rather than formal inclusion alone; the democratic state must therefore make room for Dalits and other subordinated groups within institutions where their grievances can be directly represented. Third, he ties identity to social transformation, arguing that democracy is not merely a governmental form, but a social order grounded in equality and free from rigid barriers. In this sense, identity politics is meaningful only insofar as it works toward social democracy and the dismantling of caste hierarchies (Ambedkar, 1943/2014; Ramesh, 2022).

Recent research has proven that caste has not just been the symbolic residue of electoral politics in India but has continued to be a structuring principle of electoral politics. The empirical study conducted to research candidate choice in the 2024 general election reveals that affective voting remains one of the key aspects of party choice at the grassroots level. As Kumar observes, "the caste background of candidates remains a crucial component of the so-called 'caste equation' shaping the image and appeal of political parties" (Kumar, 2025, p. 161). It does not only exist as a representational diversity but also contains the calculation of constituency through caste, the growth of vote banks by political players, and the consolidation of electoral viability. This observation is supported by the sociological literature on caste in modern India. As Deshpande argues,

democratic modernity did not bring the caste to an end but rather reshaped it: the privileged upper castes get the opportunity to assume that they are caste-less, while the disadvantaged lower castes are compelled to strengthen their caste identity (Deshpande, 2013). Similarly, Thorat and Newman explain that caste is not limited to the dimension of elections but serves as an exclusion system. They emphasise how caste has been a source of inequality that hinders the Indian economy through the creation of inefficiencies in labour allocation and the distribution of crucial resources, which leads to the thwarting of allround development of human capital in society. (Thorat & Newman, 2007).

The criticism of identity politics, as voiced by Ambedkar, reflects the idea that the integration of poor groups into political systems does not translate into emancipation or structural transformation. Although allowing lower caste people to have seats and visibility may be a good move towards pluralising democracy, as Ambedkar said, all the political benefits will be sporadic unless the hierarchies are broken and resources are re-distributed. Not every right to representation is a right to real power, dignity, and monetary reward, since the status quo of the existing social order is impervious when it comes to the agency and empowerment of oppressed groups. This distinction highlights Ambedkar's need for political inclusion and substantive changes to address systemic inequality.

In addition, scholarly works in the caste-democracy area considerably extend the reminder provided by Ambedkar that

representation is not sufficient but a necessary condition for emancipation. An analysis conducted by Satish Yadav of the democratic paradox reveals that there has been an increasing electoral turnout in India that has failed to translate into diminishing mass poverty, thus showing a gap in the linkage of political inclusion to socioeconomic change (Yadav). Satish Deshpande's exploration of caste and the notion of castelessness adds complexity to the narrative of democratic modernity. He illustrates that caste does not simply disappear but is instead transformed into less visible forms of dominance by certain groups, while the structural disadvantages faced by historically marginalised communities persist (Deshpande, 2013). This imbalance highlights the constraints of a model of democracy that purely represents it. This is further criticised by empirical studies on caste and inequality. Likewise, Surinder S. Jodhka recently reflected on the futures of caste, claiming that caste did not evaporate under the circumstances of modernity but rather was transformed to suit the new economic conditions and political realities, wherein caste has gained a new meaning today (Jodhka, 2024). These contributions come to a pivotal point where it is concluded that, although caste-based mobilisation has increased the competition arena of democracy, there is still no guarantee that it has changed the social hierarchies persisting in accessing resources and dignity.

In this context, Ambedkar's democratic vision seems visionary and normative. He never identifies political presence with social transformation, nor is he

obliged to think that the processes of electoral inclusion can dissolve the deeply entrenched systems of graded inequality. Instead, his vision of democracy is essentially a social one. He aims to restructure the relationships that maintain hierarchies, stigma, and exclusion. In this usage, identity politics can be seen as the iceberg of democracy, insofar as it emancipates the political space by making it visible and heard but may not necessarily make inroads into the more refractory level of social power. The main question that Ambedkar posed thus continues to be of serious concern: can identity-based politics ever shift the very structures that give rise to the issue of exclusion, or will it stabilise the existing ones via some make-believe processes of inclusion? The futility of representation that is not accompanied by substantive redistribution and the abolition of hierarchies based on caste is that identity will become a form of presence without change.

Representation versus Transformation: The Limits of Symbolic Politics

The main argument of this paper is that, although representation is a necessary condition, it is normatively inadequate unless it brings about social change. To read Ambedkar today, we must reclaim this distinction from the postcolonial perspective. Representation has the potential to interrupt the process of exclusion by allowing marginalised groups to enter institutions, but it never breaks down the institutions which give rise to inequality. Thus, we are quite categorical that the modern trend of equating identity politics with democratic deepening is

incorrect. We suggest that by keeping identity politics within the confines of representation, as visibility, presence, or electoral inclusion, it runs the risk of being a kind of symbolic politics that stabilises but does not change caste hierarchy.

Empirical research indicates that growth in political representation has not been accompanied by a corresponding increase in social and economic inequality. According to Kohli and Murali (2025), the lower castes have gained little economically and socially even though caste mobilization has certainly pluralized representative politics in India, as Kohli and Murali (2025) points out that caste mobilisation has pluralised representative politics in India, but it has produced only limited social and economic gains for lower castes. This implies a structural gap between the inclusion and transformation processes. It is not just a question of an incomplete representation but an underlying institutional and social order that takes on representation without returning power to the marginalised. Therefore, the essential question cannot be merely who gets into institutions but whether participation in institutions transforms the conditions of the reproduction of inequality.

This weakness is more pronounced in studies on the political participation of Scheduled Castes. The study of caste and state power in Tamil Nadu suggests that, despite the expansion of Dalit political assertion and representation, governance continues to be structured by enduring caste hierarchies that shape access to power, resources and recognition (Pandian, 2007; Gorringer, 2005; Still, 2014). The fact that inequality persists

even with representation indicates that the problem cannot be reduced to tokenism; instead, the persistence of inequality is indicative of the strength of social and institutional structures that allow inclusion while resisting change. Representation in this respect may go hand in hand with domination. This is the situation that Ambedkar had predicted when he cautioned that India would be entering a “life of contradictions” and that in politics, we would have equality, and in social and economic life, we would have inequality (Ambedkar, 1949/1994, p. 1249). This paradox is not an incident but one that is constitutive of a democracy which is not socially transformed.

For Ambedkar, equality was not a question of formal presence in institutions; rather, it demanded a change in the social conditions that created subordination. It is due to this that his constitutionalism is not to be divorced of his radical social critique of the state. While upholding rights, representation, and institutional checks, he constantly reiterated that these measures were insufficient in a caste-system-ruled society. This is evident in his criticism in *The Annihilation of Caste*: “Caste is not only a division of labour but also a division of labourers” (Ambedkar, 1936/2014, p. 233). With this formulation, caste is seen as an arrangement of hierarchy at the level of social existence. In these circumstances, one can have a representation by reallocating the positions without modifying the logic of graded inequality. Therefore, we suggest that identity politics should not only be judged

according to recognition but also by the ability to change the underlying structures.

Recent theoretical interventions have disrupted the traditional frontiers of identity politics by merging them with socio-economic systems. The new caste capitalism discourse emphasises that caste should be viewed not merely as a cultural or symbolic signifier but as being deeply implicated in the material conditions of labour relations, capital accumulation, and the process of social reproduction. In this view, caste is situated within the political economy, which emphasises that economic institutions and practices reproduce and reinforce caste-based identities that determine access to resources and opportunities. Consequently, caste operates both as a symbolic system and as a material mechanism embedded within economic hierarchies, shaping social status, resource access, and life chances. This perspective does not reject identity politics but situates it within the broader political economy of inequality (Jodhka, 2012). This framework critiques identity-based representation by distinguishing the symbolic recognition of material inequalities from the social stratification underpinning it. In addressing inequality, focusing on political claims of identity without altering the economic structures that perpetuate elite divisions may inadvertently reinforce the divide among elites. This approach risks failing to transform the overarching structures of labour exploitation, resource allocation, and institutional power. This strategy promotes a more holistic politics of managing the material aspects of caste, connecting identity politics

with economic justice politics to dismantle the systemic inequalities that perpetuate inequality beyond symbolic inclusion. This approach encourages a comprehensive politics of caste management by linking identity politics with economic justice to break down systemic inequalities that go beyond mere symbolic inclusion. Thus, identity-based representation that ignores material inequality tends to be superficial and ineffective. While it can highlight elites, it does not change the underlying hierarchy of labour, access, and wealth. Importantly, moving beyond identity does not mean rejecting Ambedkar; rather, it builds on his ideas and work. Ambedkar viewed caste as an integral social system encompassing ethical, economic, and political dimensions, which he considered superficial and meaningless. It can distinguish elites but fails to alter the hierarchical state of labour, access and distribution. Notably, the step towards going beyond identity is not a rejection of Ambedkar but a further development of his approach. Ambedkar always considered caste a complete social structure, ethical, economic, and political. His claim that caste mediates both labour and status is a premonition of modern attempts to relate caste to capitalism and social reproduction. Accordingly, it critiques identity politics not as such, but rather its reduction to representational inclusion. When the caste system is not broken by having members of oppressed groups in power positions, politics that puts them in power is likely to be symbolic inclusion without real change.

The same criticism applies to the area of freedom of speech in the US. Liberal models

tend to regard speech as a formal right, whereas Ambedkar's views compel us to consider the social circumstances that make speech meaningful. Communicative power is unevenly distributed in society based on the caste structure. Speech can be free and not regulated by law, but it is socialised; hierarchies of recognition, credibility, and authority restrict it. A public space dominated by the voice of the upper classes or elite can be one in which expression is permitted in the absence of participation by the public. Therefore, freedom of speech should be viewed not only as a civil right but also as an activity that promotes social equality. The fact that Ambedkar insists on the interdependence of liberty and equality is very important: without equality, liberty results in domination as opposed to democracy (Ambedkar, 1949/1994).

In this respect, the connection between representation and speech is increasingly apparent. Representation may establish an official opening into the communicative space; however, it does not ensure that all groups have equal communicative power. A more philosophical question is whether democratic institutions and social norms allow historically marginalised people to voice their opinions on the same platforms as the privileged do. This does not just entail the right of law; the social structures that constitute the voice and recognition of the marginalised must also be changed.

Thus, the standpoint proposed in this paper is that representation is a required but restricted point in a larger project of social change. Ambedkar's philosophy requires that

democracy be evaluated not on the basis of how visible identities are in the institution but on how much it has broken caste inequalities. Limiting identity politics to the realm of representation is dangerous, as it helps to stabilise hierarchical structures. If it is oriented towards transformation, it may turn into a democratic renewal power. What needs to be done, then, is not to give up on identity politics, but to radicalise it, which means to base it on a project that does not only aim at inclusion, but also at re-establishing the social order itself.

The Present Scenario: The Continuation of Caste and the Increasing Importance of Identity

In contemporary discussions of Indian democracy, there is an increasing paradox: the continued vibrancy of Indian electoral politics and devastating structural stress. The most recent literature contends that despite democracy being one of the most important political success stories in India, it has faced continued pressure over the past decade because of increasing economic inequality, institutional change, and changes in political practice (Kohli and Murali 2025). This analysis is crucial because it situates identity politics within the broader framework of democratic stress rather than viewing it as an isolated phenomenon. In this context, identity does not merely enter an established democratic arena but is articulated within a polity characterised by polarisation, imbalanced power and unequal access to institutional resources. Consequently, the issue is not whether identity influences democratic politics but whether it does so in a manner that enhances or hobbles

democratic equality. In this extended state, caste remains a key organising principle of Indian social life. However, contrary to earlier sociological expectations that modernisation would eliminate caste, recent studies show that caste remains present and flexible in contemporary society and politics. Caste-based mobilisation has pluralised representative politics, and historically marginalised groups can now compete in electoral and institutional arenas (Kohli and Murali, 2025). However, this increase in representation has not been accompanied by social or economic equality. This disjunction indicates one of the main contradictions: political participation has become more dispersed, but the hierarchy of social relations is the same as it was before the pandemic. Thus, caste has not been abolished; on the contrary, it has been restructured as a primary site of negotiated democratic inclusion and exclusion, as recent scholarly debates have supported this persistence. In his considerations of the future of caste, Jodhka (2024) posits that the previous notion of caste decline can no longer be held true. Rather, caste continues to organise social and economic life, even in urban settings which are frequently assumed to be more fluid and meritocratic than rural ones. Jodhka's intervention is important because it shifts the analytical emphasis from caste as an identity to caste as a material social relationship. This is closer to Ambedkar's argument that caste is not merely a division of labour but "a division of labourers," organised as a graded hierarchy in which groups are ranked one above the other, thereby constituting a system of

structural oppression rather than a simple cultural identity (Ambedkar, 1936/2014, pp. 15–16). The prominence of caste underscores Ambedkar's assertion that political democracy cannot endure when founded on a social hierarchy. Furthermore, the resurgence of the caste system can be attributed to contemporary Indian politics.

Empirical studies of recent elections show that caste remains significant in political strategies, particularly in candidate selection and supporter mobilisation. Kumar (2025) highlights the influence of caste on the 2024 election, affecting electoral politics, party strategies and voter preferences. This suggests that identity politics is integral to Indian democracy and is not merely a trend. Representation is caste-based, making identity a part of the democracy. This visibility offers democratic possibilities but also presents normative challenges. Caste-based mobilisation has ended the upper-caste monopoly on political authority, enabling new modes of engagement and access to institutions. However, focusing on electoral representation may replicate the structures it aims to criticise. Rivalry among identity groups can maintain inequality by transforming hierarchies rather than abolishing them.

Ambedkar's philosophical intervention comes into play in the following ways: Ambedkar did not oppose representation but framed it within the broader context of social change. His criticism raises the question of whether democratic institutions passively accept social differences or attempt to destroy the hierarchies that

organise social differences. Furthermore, in the course of his argument, he wrote: "We must make our political democracy a social democracy as well. Political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it social democracy." (Ambedkar, 1949/1994 pp. 859–878). The persistence of caste in modern India proves that this situation has not yet been realised. This criticism of Hinduism is further reinforced by Ambedkar's emphasis on fraternity in his speech. Fraternity is not an ideal of morality for him, but the basis of social life, which makes equality and liberty practically possible. Devoid of fraternity, democratic existence disintegrates into rival identities, without a common moral horizon. In a caste society in which social relations are structured by separation and graded hierarchy, the lack of fraternity prevents the development of a truly democratic society. Thus, the modern presence of identity must be measured not simply in the context of representation but also in the context of whether this aspect leads to the establishment of a more egalitarian social order. Currently, Indian democracy exemplifies both the growth and the constraints of representation. The rise of identity politics has become a significant and essential part of India's democratic process. However, increased visibility does not automatically lead to social change. Ambedkar's insights provide a crucial viewpoint, indicating that democracy involves more than just managing identities or representation; it is a continuous endeavour to reshape the social conditions that sustain inequality. The enduring presence of caste, strain on democratic institutions, and focus on

identity politics underscore the unfinished nature of this vision.

Ambedkar and the Public Sphere: Speech, Minorities, and Democratic Culture in the Age of Late Capitalism

The issue of democracy that Ambedkar engaged with cannot be limited to institutional design or the formal allocation of political power. He was more interested in the states of democratic life as such, especially the organisation of the public sphere where people speak, are listened to, and treated as equals. This study takes a specific direction: freedom of speech and identity politics should be considered not in terms of formal rights and representation but in terms of social change and equality in communicative power. In this respect, Ambedkar provides not only a normative framework but also a critical approach to diagnosing the current crisis of democracy under capitalism.

The central part of Ambedkar's thinking is the acknowledgement that speech is not socially neutral. It is incorporated into the system of power relations, hierarchy, and recognition. Ambedkar was very clear in his warning against the derogation of democracy for majority rule during the debates in the Constituent Assembly of India. Unless equality was achieved, he warned that without equality, liberty would produce the supremacy of the few over the many (Ambedkar, 1949/1994). This is not merely a constitutional protection; it is a theory of common spaces. This means that the speech of democracy should be designed to avoid the recreation of domination. According to Ambedkar,

minorities are not passive beneficiaries of protection but rather the key players in democratic life. A democracy that puts a muzzle on the minority (even by proxy) is no longer democratic in principle, whether it is institutional or not. This understanding is more than just timely, considering the modernisation of popular space in late capitalism. The growth of digital media, social platforms, algorithmic curation, and data-driven communication has radically transformed speech. At the outset, these technologies seem to democratise expression by reducing entry barriers. Nevertheless, there is more than meets the eye in this apparent media democratisation. The algorithms of platforms and corporate infrastructures now mediate visibility, credibility, and influence, favouring some types of speech over others (Srnicek 2017; Couldry and Mejias 2019). Consequently, the right to speak does not ensure the ability to be heard, as it has become a mere formality.

Ambedkar's framework facilitates a more lucid and effective explanation of these contradictions. The issue of democracy is not exhausted by the mere availability of speech; rather, the circumstances under which speech attains social efficacy constitute the problem that he emphasised. This framework suggests that hierarchy manifests even at the level of human values. This hierarchy delineates an individual's credibility, rationality, and authority. These disparities are not mitigated in the popular online domain; instead, they are often exacerbated through algorithmic amplification, majoritarian sentiments, and prioritising dominant discourses in the digital

sphere. Consequently, the public sphere remains ostensibly open yet substantively unequal.

This brings us to the main argument of this paper: freedom of speech in modern India cannot be comprehended without examining its political and economic dimensions. In the circumstances of late capitalism, speech is increasingly commodified and transformed into data, attention, and quantifiable engagements. Visibility is monetised, and the discourse of the people is subordinate to the principles of virality and profitability (Srnicek, 2017). In these systems, democratic deliberation is replaced by attention to competition. The words unrestricted and unbridled licence, as cautioned by Ambedkar, gain new meaning (Ambedkar, 1949/1994). The problem is not that it is too free but that there is no democratic regulation of a communicative order arranged by capitalist and algorithmic logic.

This critique of Hinduism is further enhanced by the fact that minorities are the focus of Ambedkar's work. For him, minorities are not a group of people who need protection but rather a moral challenge to democracy. The democratic public sphere should provide minority voices with the opportunity to contribute equally to creating collective life. Nevertheless, in the modern online world, minority voices are often harassed, marginalised and symbolically excluded. Such exclusions do not necessarily originate in the state; they are frequently generated by networks of decentralisation, which are enhanced by the structure of platforms and mobilisation that are dominated

by majorities. This marks the end of exclusion, which is institutional to networked exclusion, where power functions using decentralised but coordinated mechanisms.

This situation reveals another crisis: the undermining of democratic culture. The idea of fraternity, the least important yet most philosophical aspect of Ambedkar's thought, became pivotal in the post-Ambedkarian era. In his speech to the Constituent Assembly, Ambedkar defined fraternity as a sense of common brotherhood of all Indians—of Indians being one people—emphasising that it constitutes the social foundation of democracy, without which liberty and equality cannot become a natural social reality (Ambedkar, 1949/1994). In its absence, liberty and equality are impossible to achieve. Nevertheless, modern public spaces are becoming increasingly polarised into echo chambers fuelled by antagonistic identities and polarised debates. It is not a pluralistic public sphere but a disjointed one in which mutual recognition is replaced by suspicion and hostility.

According to Ambedkar, this fragmentation is cultural and structural. This is indicative of the interplay between the caste hierarchy and the modernity of capitalism, in which older types of inequality are replicated in new technological ones. Here, identity politics is not only important but also unsuccessful in achieving its goals. This is required because marginalised groups need to establish their voices in public spaces that do not accommodate them. However, this is not enough, since representation in an imbalanced communicative structure is insufficient to

effect change in the long run. Identity politics needs to be critically reoriented. It is necessary to shift the focus of visibility and recognition towards changing the structures that systematise inequality. The same argument applies to the functioning of a nation's democratic institutions. Ambedkar maintained that the Constitution "only provides a machinery for the government of the country" and is not designed to secure power for any group (Ambedkar, 1948/1994, p. 118). Although he stressed that its success largely depends on constitutional morality. In the modern world, the role of digital communication, media discourse, and algorithm-driven opinions increasingly affects institutions' functioning. Unequal mediation leads to less accountability and transforms democratic processes into spectacles rather than real deliberations. Therefore, the democracy crisis is a crisis of perception and political engagement.

Thus, the position advocated in this study is normative in nature. First, freedom of speech must not be regarded as a right but as socially distributed power defined by caste, capital, and technology. Second, the concept of identity politics must not be studied in the frame of representational success; instead, it is important to view it in terms of its transformative power. Third, fraternity must be strengthened as the most important principle of democratic life, without which neither liberty nor equality is possible. Such claims may be viewed as an Ambedkarite critique of the contemporary Indian public sphere.

In this respect, one can assume that Ambedkar anticipated what can be described

as a critical theory of the public sphere in the context of late capitalism. He showed that democracy was unviable when discussions were dominated by power structures, whether they were social, economic, or technological. His insights have proven relevant over the years owing to the current democratic crisis of polarisation, unequal visibility, and the commodification of communication.

Conclusion

This study presents three interrelated concerns that highlight the perennial importance of Ambedkar's democratic philosophy. This demonstrates how Ambedkar rectifies the aspect that representation is satisfactory. Even though marginal groups have been accorded institutional access through political participation, this does not always mean that they will receive justice. The ongoing hierarchies founded on caste mean that the structures of power, recognition, and access have not changed substantially. Therefore, Ambedkar encourages us to judge democracy based on how social relations are transformed in such a way that renders inequality, rather than by the availability of marginalised populations in the political arena.

Second, it refigures the concept of freedom of speech through a critique of the philosophical application of freedom of speech as developed by Ambedkar, who criticises the liberal notion of equality. In societies where hierarchies are firmly established, free expression, recognition, and serious consideration are not equal. Thus, the right to speech ought to be regarded as not a specific and closed legal right, but rather,

existing within a social context. Ambedkar's opinion highlights that such freedom of expression can only be accomplished through social equality; otherwise, the spoken word might be a right on paper but a limitation in practice. Therefore, to promote democratic communication, it is necessary to dismantle the structures that undermine or disenfranchise certain voices.

Third, this study identifies the fact that there is a paradox of more electoral inclusion and yet the same time, the caste continues to be prevalent as a social organising principle in Indian democracy. Caste-based mobilisation has not eradicated inequalities in resources, dignity, and power; however, various representations in politics have diversified, and dominant assertions of power have been diluted. Ambedkar's ideas on social democracy and brotherhood show that political equality requires social change. The main issue is not if identities are part of democracy, but if these processes can change hierarchies instead of just giving some identities a political voice.

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